

# **Herbal Guide for Cold & Flu**

By Cat Ellis © 2013

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This paper is based on my workshop, *Herbal Medicine for Cold & Flu Relief*. For more information on upcoming workshops, please check my [website](#).

## Disclaimer

I am an herbalist. My scope of practice involves the safe, traditional use of plant and natural materials to improve health and wellness.

I am not a physician. I cannot and do not diagnose, prescribe pharmaceuticals, or claim to cure any particular disease. If you require medical advice, please seek out a licensed physician.

Before trying any remedy suggested here, the responsibility is on the user to research the appropriateness of each ingredient for his/herself. Reading this guide does not imply any professional relationship between myself or the reader.

I cannot be held liable for any ill effects as a result of reading this guide. Use all information at your own risk with a heavy dose of common sense.

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## Overview

No one enjoys being sick. The fevers, coughing, congestion, are just miserable, and some infections can become quite serious. And for all the legitimate wonders of modern medicine, it can do very little to prevent infections, lessen the symptoms, or shorten the duration.

Herbal remedies, on the other hand, can do quite a bit more. This really is one of those areas where herbal medicine truly shines. They are simple, effective, affordable, and ingredients are easily accessible.

Even if you have never made any type of herbal remedies before., you can do this. I've designed this free download to be useful even if you have no herbal experience at all. To create a starting point accessible to everyone, I'm setting a few criteria:

- Preference is given to ingredients that are typically found in local stores all over the US at all times of the year.
- Preference is given to the methods that use supplies that people already commonly own or are easy to obtain.
- Ingredients not typically found outside of herb shops or online herbal retailers are included because their value is too great not to mention and are really worth the effort to obtain.

We all start somewhere, and my start in herbs was treating my own cold and flu discomforts with ingredients available at my local grocery store. I've learned a lot since then, but it was a great starting point to learn about the effectiveness and simplicity of medicinal herbs and foods.

As you progress in herbalism, I strongly recommend that you grow your own herbs and medicinal plants. This will allow you to collect your own medicines when they are most potent. Trade with herbs, seeds, and plants with friends. Get a good guidebook for your local area, and go on “weed walks” to become familiar with the plants in your neighborhood (and in vacant lots, parks, walking trails, etc.). If you do more than just identify plants on your walk and and collect, aka wildcrafting, your herbs, always be respectful. Leave enough for both others to harvest, and for the plant to thrive. Herbalism can be an opportunity to build community as well as to make medicines.

## Methods

### *Infusions -Decoctions-Syrups-Tinctures-Vinegars- Hydromels*

The most familiar and easy preparation for herbal remedies is tea. There is something so comforting about a hot cup of tea even on a good day. When you are sick, however, that steam rising from the cup helps ease congestion, and the hot liquid calms down inflamed throats and hacking coughs. However, making medicinal herbal tea isn't quite the same as making a cup of tea to accompany breakfast or an afternoon snack.

Herbal tea for therapeutic purposes can be made either as an **infusion** or a **decoction**. Infusions are made with the delicate parts of the plant (leaf, flower, fresh berries, etc), where the material is allowed to steep in water. Decoctions are made with the tough parts of a plant (root, bark, dried berries, etc) by allowing the water to evaporate to half its original volume. It isn't that one is more potent than the other. It is that different plant materials require different methods to extract.

Most people have made infusions. Tea is an infusion. However, making a medicinal infusion is a little different than making a typical cup of tea. Medicinal tea is steeped longer, with more plant material, and is consequently more potent. A medicinal tea takes a minimum of 30 minutes of covered steeping. Many herbalists will steep 1oz of herbs in a cup of water. I prefer to use 1tbs in a cup of water. You can bring your water up to a boil before adding your herbs, but I prefer to remove from heat just before boiling.

There are many ways to steep loose material in your water. I make my tea the night before in a glass mason jar, let it cool down (takes a couple of hours), and then keep in the refrigerator overnight. The next morning I strain it, reserving the liquid, and returning the liquid to the jar. This lets me gently reheat my tea throughout the day as needed without a lot of prep work.

A tip to prevent the mason jar lids from self-sealing that I picked up from one of my herbal teachers is to turn the lid upside down, before screwing on the metal ring. Since I also do a lot of canning, I have the BPA-free Tattler reusable canning lids and use those without the rubber. You can also buy convenient, plastic screw-on caps for your jars.

Sometimes, though, I only want one cup of tea. I have a mesh strainer that sits on the lip of almost every size of cup or mug. I put the strainer in my cup, and pout it in near-boiling water. Then I take the lid from the pot and put it on top of my tea cup. I let it stand for 30

minutes, then remove the lid and the strainer with the herbs.

A decoction is a little different. Here you take the plant material and add it to a pot of cold water. You bring the water up to a boil, and then reduce to a simmer. Some herbalists will boil for ten minutes before reducing to a simmer. I will do that depending on the material. If I have a lot of fresh items, like garlic cloves and ginger root, I wouldn't bother boiling for ten minutes. If I have a lot of dried material, bark, etc., then I will. If I have a combination, then I boil for ten minutes. Once you have gently simmered for an additional thirty minutes, uncovered, your liquid should be reduced by half. Keep an eye on it. If the simmer is too fast, you will reduce the liquid before your timer goes off, and end up burning your precious plant material. (Ask me how I know!) Strain through a mesh strainer, reserving the liquid.

You can also make a **double decoction**, by allowing the liquid to reduce by half a second time. So, if you start with two cups of water in the pot, you will end up with one half cup from a double decoction. When I am making in a syrup, this is my preferred method because the syrup will be thicker.

Now, what happens if the tea you wish to make uses both delicate and hard materials? First make a decoction of the hard materials. Once the liquid has reduced, turn off the heat, and add in your delicate material. Cover, and allow to steep for another 30 minutes. If you have a compost pile, tumbler, or a Bokashi composting system, don't forget to compost your spent herbs after straining.

**Syrups** are easy to make. Make either an infusion or a decoction, and add a sweet liquid. Most often, this will be honey, but it can also be maple syrup, sorghum syrup, molasses, glycerin, or a simple syrup made from sugar and water. I almost always use honey, but for babies under one year old, I substitute real maple syrup (no artificially flavored syrups) to avoid any risk of botulism. Make a double decoction, and while still warm (or warm up again if needed) pour into a pint jar. Add honey (or maple syrup, etc.) to fill the jar.

The warmth from the decoction will help incorporate it into the honey. If you do reheat the decoction to warm it up, do not let it become scalding hot. If you cannot comfortably put your finger in the liquid (clean hands please), it is too hot and you will kill the enzymes in the honey.

One of my favorite ways to make herbal medicines is to make a **tincture**. Tinctures are an alcohol extraction where the plant is steeped in alcohol for six weeks, strained, and the liquid bottled for future use. Alcohol does contain some water, and this allows for the extraction of both water soluble and alcohol soluble chemical constituents. They are simple to

make, potent plant medicines, and when stored properly, last indefinitely.

Tinctures can be made with either fresh or dried plant materials. The most potent tinctures would be made from fresh plant material using grain alcohol (sold in many places as Everclear). The alcohol will draw out both the alcohol soluble constituents, as well as the water in the plant. With that water, it draws the water soluble constituents. If using dried plant material, you would have to dilute the alcohol with water. On average, the range will vary from 40%-65% alcohol.

You will need a good, basic, herbal reference book to look up the proper ratio of plant to menstruum (the liquid in which you are steeping your herbs), and the proper dilution percentages for working with dried plants. There are several available online for free, such as Michael Moore's *Materia Medica*, which is available as a downloadable PDF [here](#). Allow the herbs to steep in the menstruum for six weeks. If using dried herbs, then the alcohol would also need to be diluted with water in order to extract the water soluble constituents, and the PDF above provides that information as well.

However, the Simpler's Method is probably the most used and works beautifully. Simply fill a jar with herbs, then pour alcohol of at least 80 proof over the herbs so they are covered in the alcohol. Secure with an airtight lid, and allow to sit for six weeks, turning or gently shaking the jar every other day. There is no need to dilute the alcohol if you are using dried herbs, as the 80 proof alcohol already is part water. I only fill the jar about three quarters of the way to allow for some swelling of the herbal material and ease of shaking the jar.

After six weeks, regardless of the method used, strain out the herbs, and save the liquid to bottle in clearly labeled, dark, glass bottles to store in a cool, dark place. Alcohol will eventually break down plastics, so avoid storing tinctures in plastic or using alcohol from a plastic bottle for your herbal medicines.

You can also use glycerin in the same way. Sometimes, you will hear this called a glycerin tincture, but it's more properly called a **glycerite**. This is not a favorite extraction form of mine, as it doesn't extract nearly the amount of medicinal properties that other menstruums do. However, glycerin has a soothing action on the skin, and it can make for a soothing ingredient in skin preparations and ear drops.

If you need to make a tincture, and you do not wish to make an alcohol-based extraction, another option is to make an **herbal vinegar**. These are very simple to make, and unlike making infused oils, will not go rancid. The acid in the vinegar also prevents the growth of botulism. There is no need to dilute vinegar with water, but please use a good quality

vinegar, like raw apple cider vinegar. (Stay away from white vinegar.) The process is the same. Fill the jar, pour vinegar to cover, secure with a lid, and allow to sit and steep for up to six weeks. Technically, you can start tasting your vinegar after two weeks. If the flavor seems strong enough to you, you can use it. But, keep checking each week until it's just right for you.

A lovely variation on an herbal vinegar is the **hydromel**. In this case, an herbal vinegar is blended with honey. You could even add herbs to the honey to infuse it with additional herbal benefits and flavors, and use that in your herbal recipes. The ratio of herbal vinegar to honey is going to vary, depending upon how sweet you want to make it. Somewhere between 50/50 and 25% honey to 75% vinegar is typical.

## The Herbs

Technically speaking, the botanical definition of “herb” is any seed-bearing plant that does not have a woody stem and dies down after flowering. For common usage, most people working with herbs use the word as a catch all for many items, not only herbs. Herbal recipes often include other types of plants, but also may include berries, flowers, fungi (like mushrooms), lichens (like usnea), and sugars (honey, maple syrup, raw maple sap, molasses, etc.), to name a few of the common additions.

Here are some of the herbs and plant materials that are commonly used for cold and flu relief that you are most likely to find at the grocery store all year round. This isn't the ideal way to obtain herbs, as those you harvest yourself will be more potent, and buying herbs in bulk from an herb shop or online retailer is more cost effective. But, grocery stores make many common plant medicines available to the widest number of people at all times of the year. There is usually one close by, and there is no waiting for a shipment to arrive. This is also where I first started gathering ingredients for herbal medicines, and they worked quite well.

There are also two recommendations for herbs that are not carried locally. These will require a trip to an herb shop or ordering online. However, they are so helpful, I just couldn't write a guide like this without including them.

The descriptions that follow are not exhaustive plant profiles. You are encouraged to research each plant thoroughly on your own. What is provided here is enough information for you to safely and quickly begin using herbs to make cold and flu relief remedies. If there are

contraindications (ie, not safe to take during pregnancy, not for people with high blood pressure, etc.), it will be noted.

You will find that most of the precautions involve large doses given frequently over time. Garlic is a great example. Consistent consumption of large amounts may thin the blood. But, no one has ever bled out over their Shrimp Scampi. That said, always do your own research and use your common sense.

I have included suggested dosages for average sized adults in good health. Always pay attention to your own body's signals and feedback. Research any potential contraindications or warnings, and adjust the dosage up or down if necessary. Suggested dosages for children and the elderly are not covered in this guide.

I have also not included essential oils to this list. I love essential oils, and I often use them in alleviating cold and flu symptoms. However, they can be pricey, are not easily produced at home, and are not nearly as available at the local level as herbs.

Herbs easily obtained at the grocery store:

- *Anise, Pimpinella asinum*

**Actions:** Expectorant, antiseptic

**Parts Used:** Seed

**Uses:** Breaks up congestion, helps to ease coughing, fights infection, provides a licorice-like flavor

**Precautions:** Do not take during pregnancy or if you have an estrogen-sensitive cancer, as anise is high in phytoestrogen. It is safe during nursing, and is a galactagogue.

- *Cayenne, Capsicum minimum*

**Actions:** Antibacterial, antioxidant, antiscorbutic, antispasmodic

**Parts Used:** Fruit

**Uses:** The spicy taste can help get sinuses draining while calming violent coughing. Cayenne is a source of Vit C and supports the immune system.

**Precautions:** Do not touch eyes or other delicate tissues after handling cayenne. Use of protective gloves is encouraged. In case of exposure, rinse affected area with milk



or cream.

- *Cinnamon, Cinnamomum zeylanicum, Cinnamomum cassia*

**Actions:** Antibacterial, stimulant

**Parts Used:** Bark

**Uses:** Added to remedies to warm the body, improve flavor of other ingredients, soothes a sore throat.

**Precautions:** Dependent on variety. Cassia contains coumarin, which if cassia is taken in large amounts over time *could* become a problem for people on bloodthinners, increasing the effect. This is unlikely, as it really would require large amounts of cassia. Zeylanicum only contains trace amounts and is not considered an issue. Zeylanicum (sweet cinnamon) is preferred anyway, as cassia is considered inferior for medicinal purposes.

- *Garlic, Allium sativum*

**Actions:** Broad-spectrum antimicrobial, expectorant

**Parts Used:** Bulb

**Uses:** Must first expose the inside of a garlic clove to oxygen to cause the chemical reaction that gives garlic its healing properties. Good for bronchitis and supporting the immune system.

**Precautions:** In large amounts over time, garlic is hypotensive and may also lower blood glucose levels. Take caution if you are already taking blood thinners or diabetic medication.

- *Ginger, Zingiber officinale*

**Actions:** Analgesic, antioxidant, diaphoretic, febrifuge

**Parts Used:** Root

**Uses:** Helps reduce body aches and chills due to colds and the flu. Ginger is supportive to the immune system, and also helps to reduce fevers. Ginger is a diaphoretic, and will cause the body to detoxify through sweating.

**Precautions:** Ginger has sometimes been associated with encouraging menstruation. However, it is also a remedy for morning sickness. Many pregnant women use ginger in their diet with no ill effect. However, cardamom can be substituted for ginger without

any risk of side effects.

- *Horseradish, Amoracia rusticana, Cochlearia armoacia*

**Actions:** Antibacterial, antiscorbutic diaphoretic, expectorant

**Parts Used:** Root

**Uses:** Decongests the respiratory system (lungs and sinus), good source of immune-supporting Vit C, detoxifying through increased sweating, useful for treating sore throats.

**Precautions:** Horseradish seems to decrease the effectiveness of the thyroid medication Levothyroxine. It is also a powerful diuretic. Use some caution if you are already on a diuretic. Horseradish is also extremely spicy-hot. If spicy foods bother you, be sure to use only a small amount of horseradish.

- *Echinacea, Echinacea angustifolia, echinacea purpurea, echinacea pallida*

**Actions:** Antibacterial, antiviral, depurative, immuno-stimulant

**Parts Used:** Root (flowers and stems are not as potent)

**Uses:** Assists the cleansing and movement of lymph, fights infections, and helps support efficient lymphatic and immune system function. Effective against both bacterial and viral infections, but works more effectively combined with a berberine. Best used at the first sign of discomfort, and must be taken often enough in a high enough dose to be effective: 1 drop of echinacea tincture for every 1 pound of body weight every hour. (Look in the tea isle for this herb.)

**Precautions:** Contraindicated for people with an allergy to ragweed or have an autoimmune disease.

- *Oregano (wild marjoram), Origanum vulgare*

**Actions:** Antibacterial, antispasmodic, antiviral, diaphoretic,

**Parts Used:** Leaves, stems

**Uses:** Helps to fight infection, induce detoxification through sweating, helps to calm cough in bronchitis.

**Precautions:** In very large doses, oregano can interfere with the effectiveness of insulin, and can stimulate the heart and circulation. Amounts like those found in food are not a considered a concern. The essential oil is contraindicated in pregnancy.

- *Peppermint, Mentha piperita*

**Actions:** Stimulant, antispasmodic, diaphoretic, decongestant

**Parts Used:** Herb

**Uses:** Helps to thin mucus, eases breathing, calms coughing, induces sweating and detoxification. (Look in the tea isle for this herb.)

**Precautions:** none

- *Sage, Salvia officinalis*

**Actions:** Analgesic, antibacterial, antioxidant, astringent,

**Parts Used:** Leaves, whole herb

**Uses:** Fights infections, can be used to make a gargle to sore throats, dries up overly “wet” conditions.

**Precautions:** Not advised for those with seizure disorders, people with elevated blood pressure, or pregnant women. Adverse reactions noted only in large, concentrated amounts.

- *Thyme, Thymus vulgaris*

**Actions:** Analgesic, antibacterial, antioxidant, antispasmodic, antitussive, antiviral, depurative, expectorant,

**Parts Used:** Herb

**Uses:** Fights all respiratory infections, excellent for bronchitis and whooping cough. Lessens body aches and sore throats. Causes detoxification through sweating.

**Precautions:** The herb is generally considered safe. The oil and excessive amounts are not suitable for children or pregnant women.

Herbs worth seeking out from herb shops or online retailers:

- *Elder, Sambucus nigra*

**Actions:** Antibacterial, antiviral, depurative

**Parts Used:** Berries, flowers

**Uses:** Elderberries are a known flu remedy demonstrated to cut the duration of the flu

in half, which outperforms prescription Tamiflu's ability to shorten the duration of the flu by 1-2 days. Effective as a preventative for cold and flu season. The flowers are known to clear the lungs. Combining the two in remedies is a power herbal medicine for respiratory ailments.

**Precautions:** Caution should be taken with other parts of the plant, like the roots and leaves, which are emetic. There are no known precautions for the berries or flowers.

- *Oregon Grape Root, Berberis aquifolium, Mahonia aquifolium*

**Actions:** Antibiotic, antioxidant

**Parts Used:** Root

**Uses:** Contains berberine, which has a potent antibiotic action, good for when a secondary, bacterial infection is suspected after a cold or flu should have resolved. Substitute for the over-harvested berberine remedy, goldenseal.

Precautions: Must supplement with probiotics, yogurt, kefir, etc. Not to be taken for more than 7 days. Contraindicated during pregnancy and breastfeeding.

## A Sampling of Remedies

Most of the remedies suggested here can be made with items from the grocery store. This is not in any way an exhaustive list, but is intended to provide a starting point.

### Sore Throat Gargle

- Make an infusion of thyme, sage, and cinnamon. It would be a good idea to make a quart at a time for repeated use with little work, and store in the refrigerator.
- Strain herbs, and transfer liquid to a clean container.
- Add a teaspoon of Oregon grape root tincture.
- Heat a cup (if not already hot) infusion only to tolerance and no more.
- Add ½ teaspoon of salt, and stir to dissolve.
- Gargle with salted infusion as needed to relieve pain.
- Do not swallow. Spit out gargle into sink.

### “Fire Cider” Immune Booster

- Fill a quart jar with these (quantity of each is up to you):
    - Onions, peeled and sliced
    - Garlic cloves, peeled and sliced
    - Ginger, peeled and sliced
    - Horseradish, peeled and sliced
    - Cayenne pepper\*, a pinch with each layer
  - Cover the above ingredients with raw apple cider vinegar.
  - Let sit covered in a dark, cool place for 4-6 weeks.
  - Begin to taste at 3 weeks to see how close to “done” this is to your tastes.
  - Strain out the herbs and bottle with a label.
  - Add to salads and Bloody Mary's
  - Optional: Use as the vinegar portion of a hydromel
- \*I use red pepper flakes instead

### Demon Tea (To sweat/exorcise the cold/flu “demon” out!)

- Make a decoction from 4 cups of water and the following ingredients
  - Ginger root (a piece about the size of your thumb)
  - Garlic cloves, six, peeled and sliced
  - Cloves, 9 (the type you stick in a ham, analgesic)
  - Cinnamon sticks, 3-4, broken into pieces
  - As much horseradish as you can tolerate
  - Anise seeds, 1tsp
- When the decoction is ready (after about 30 minutes), add a teaspoon of thyme and ½ teaspoon cayenne (or red pepper flakes) to infuse covered for 30 minutes.
- Strain. Serve hot to tolerance, and sweeten with honey. Drink as needed.

### Cold-Be-Gone Syrup

- Make a double decoction of garlic starting from 2 cups of water to approximately ½ cup.
- Turn heat off, and add the following herbs to the pot:

- Oregano, 1 tsp
- Thyme, 1 tsp
- Cover the pot, and allow to steep for 30 minutes.
- Strain, and transfer liquid to a pint mason jar.
- While still warm, add honey to jar and mix well.
- Store in refrigerator for 1 month.
- Store in freezer for 1 year.
- Take 1 tsp every 3 hours while symptomatic. When symptoms start to subside, take 1 tsp twice daily until symptoms are gone.

### Elderberry Syrup

- Make a double decoction of ½ cup dried elderberries in 2 cups of water.
- Optional: Add 1 tsp peeled and chopped ginger
- Optional: Add 2 cinnamon sticks, broken up
- Optional: When the double decoction is fully reduced, add ¼ cup elderflowers and steep covered for 30 minutes.
- Strain and transfer to a pint jar.
- While still warm, fill to the top with honey.

### Elderberry Elixir

- Add 1 cup of elderberry syrup to a pint jar.
- Mix in brandy to fill the jar.
- Take to ease yourself to sleep with the flu or bad cough

### Cold and Flu Tincture

- Combine Oregon grape root, echinacea root, and dried elderberries in equal portions and fill a quart jar  $\frac{3}{4}$  full.
- Fill with vodka (80-100 proof)
- Take approximately 30 drops in a couple of ounces of water or juice, 3-4 times per day for no more than 10 days\* straight. Supplement with yogurt (maybe with elderberry syrup for a topping), kefir, or probiotic capsule because of the Oregon grape root,

during and for 1 week after the 10 days is completed.

\*Normally, Oregon grape would be taken for only 7 days. Here, it is somewhat diluted in a blend. But, do not use for more than 10 days. Oregon grape is a powerful antibacterial herb and does not discriminate between good and bad bacteria.

## Conclusion

While far from an exhaustive resource, I hope that readers, especially those who have never worked with herbs before, feel they have the tools to make some basic, traditional, herbal remedies to help soothe the discomforts of the cold or the flu. This guide should be considered a starting point, a launching pad, for more thorough herbal studies.

Go try some of the remedies, start some tinctures, make some syrups, and explore the world of herbal medicine-making. Experiment with blending teas, and make up your own syrup recipes. The recipes I've provided are intended to spark your creativity. They are the beginning, not the end. I firmly believe that the best remedies are tailored specifically for each individual.

I hope you enjoyed this guide and found it useful. Thank you for reading it, and check out my blog [www.HerbalPrepper.com](http://www.HerbalPrepper.com), for more freebies, guides, and books to come, as well as upcoming workshops and my latest herbal and prepper-related updates!

## Resources

If you would like to order herbs, two companies that I have had good experiences with are:

Mountain Rose Herbs- [www.MountainRoseHerbs.com](http://www.MountainRoseHerbs.com)

Jean's Greens- [www.JeansGreens.com](http://www.JeansGreens.com)